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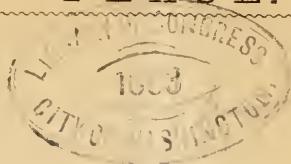
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PEACE.



SPEECH

OF

BENJAMIN WOOD, OF NEW YORK,

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 27th, 1863.

MR. SPEAKER: During the first session of the present Congress, and one week before the slaughter at Manassas had awakened our people to the realities of war, I offered in this House the following resolution:

Resolved, That this Congress recommend the Governors of the several States to convene their Legislatures, for the purpose of calling an election to select two delegates from each congressional district, to meet in general convention at Louisville, in Kentucky, on the first Monday of September next; the purpose of the said convention to be to devise measures for the restoration of peace to our country."

That resolution was laid upon the table. In its place, from time to time, emanated from this and other branches of the Government certain edicts, laws, and proclamations which, while powerless to affect rebellion at the South, have revolutionized the political sentiment of the North.

Sir, I sincerely believe that, had my resolution been adopted, the then vacillating feeling of the South would have been won to honor-

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able compromise, and the blessings of peace and Union would this day cheer the land. But even if ineffectual—looking back to the period when I presented it, and over the blood-stained record of the intervening time—I feel that its adoption could have lent no additional horrors to that fearful history. If the logic of events should bring the conviction that the course I then suggested might have averted from our country the curse of a desolating war, the responsibility of its rejection will not be mine.

Sir, I desire to shun the language of reproach, and to avoid unnecessary retrospection. I drag the past from its shroud only as an imploration for the future. For two years we have been leagued with death. We have inflamed ourselves into the wildest state of ~~we~~ like phrensy. In our legislative halls, in our market places, and in our temples of worship, we have tumbled the white image of peace from its pedestal. Upon the edge of the sword we have balanced our country's fate. We have rebuked and villified, and chastised and shut out from the light of Heaven all those that would not re-echo the hoarse notes of war.

Passion, excitement, an overstrained philanthropy, a false inspiration for the emblem of our nationality, a heroic but misdirected devotion to the Union, all these have had their sway. It is time that reason should sit in judgment, taking counsel only from humanity. We invoked the spirit of war to save—it came but to destroy. Our treasures are emptied. Our posterity will be accursed with a crushing debt. Hundreds of thousands of our bravest rest in untimely graves. As many more, limbless, with shattered frames or broken by disease, moan in hospitals, or crave alms by the highways. Everywhere the garb of mourning afflicts the eye—a silent reproach from orphans, widows, and bereaved parents. The death blow, struck upon the battle-field, is felt in the cottager's distant house. There you may find the saddest record of the war. You will trace it in the lines upon the matron's brow; you will see it in the whiteness of the young bride's cheek; you will hear it in the subdued tones of the father's voice, who feels the staff of his age shivered from his grasp. Graves in our valleys, sufferers in

our hospitals, desolation at every hearth-stone, distrust in our rulers, distrust in ourselves, bankruptcy, anarchy, and ruin—these are the triumphs won by your relentless policy.

All that has been done is but what, were the past revocable, reason and humanity would recall. With all respect for the valor of our armies, and without reproach to the capacity or fidelity of our generals, not one tangle of this gordian knot has the sword severed; not one avenue has it carved through the frowning and steadily-enlarging barrier between North and South.

The close of each campaign tells the repeated tale of victories barren of all fruits, or of defeats with an equal absence of result; of advance and retrogression; of generals hurried up to the high post of honor, and as hastily thrust aside. The Administration, through its partizan presses, occupies the people with rich promises of achievements in the future, but achieves only the stale nothings of the past. Assuming that the reconstruction of the Union is the object of the struggle, I ask every citizen not wilfully blind to our present condition, have we not been receding from that object? Has all this blood-letting abated one jot the fever of rebellion? Has it not confirmed its malignity—deep-seated it into the very Southern heart? Sir, it has done more; it has made disunion the sentiment of the entire South.

It is habitual to throw the weight of responsibility for our impotence upon the Administration and its generals. Imbecility and incompetence have indeed been sufficiently conspicuous, but not to these do I attribute the failure, the utter, unequivocal, and irremediable failure of our enterprise of conquering back the Union. The failure of the scheme is simply due to the impossibility of its accomplishment. We can never, by force of arms, control the will of a people our equals in the attributes of enlightened manhood; and while the will of that people remains adverse to political companionship with us, political companionship is impossible. Bloodshed, destruction of property, and occupation of lands are possible; much suffering, grief, and folly are possible—we have too sadly proved it; but a constrained Union of sovereign States is an impossibility, which, if omnipotence could accom-

plish, omniscience would not attempt. Six millions of Americans, whether they occupy the North, the South, the East, or the West, cannot be governed except in accordance with their sovereign will.

Sir, I mean this not as an idle compliment to the American character. The experience of the past twelve months has revealed in that so much of passion, pride, and blood thirst, that I am more inclined to humility than boastfulness. I feel that upon the fresh, pure soil of the New World we have thrown the seeds of discord, and they will take root. But while my experience, and the testimony of our fathers through eighty-seven years of prosperity and progress, have well established my faith in the beneficence of a Union of the States, I cannot understand that its blessings are of a nature to be enjoyed upon compulsion.

But granting it possible, the question arises of equal moment, is it desirable? Has not the struggle already been too fierce to admit of unity and cordial feeling between a conquering and a conquered section? Sir, I fear it has. I believe that, while the memory of this war exists, the people of the North and South, united by constraint, would never sufficiently forgive the past year's record to admit of kindly relationship in the same political household.

Right or wrong, men will cling to their own impressions of a great and sanguinary struggle, in which they or their sires have been participants. As the living fathers of future generations this day feel, so will they bequeath to their children, and in natural course, the North and South will nurse their own and separate views of this unparalleled epoch of carnage and contention.

Will the text-book of history conned by the boys of Massachusetts serve hereafter in the school-rooms of the Carolinas? Will the stories of Manassas, of Shiloh, of Antietam, of Fredericksburg, of a hundred other battle-fields, be told in the same spirit northward and southward from the banks of the Potomac? Will the winter tales be similar when the youth of either section gather about the hearthstone, and feel the young blood tingle in their veins at the words of white haired heroes? Will the matrons of Louisiana train their offspring to venerate the name of Butler? Will the remembrances of Davis, Lee, and

Johnson be identical in New England and Virginia? No, sir. Unless mutual consent should reunite us, the pages of history and the words of tradition will breathe of the sympathies that now exist; and the generations to come will as surely be educated to distinct and opposite prejudices. The school-room, the pulpit, and the press, would then, as now, inculcate doctrines that cannot assimilate; and in this Capitol, the representatives of the people would be the representatives of sectional antipathies.

Sir, to avoid this, we must avoid inflicting the sting of submission, or engendering the pride of conquest.

To me that future of domestic discontent, of jealousy, distrust, and irritation, is so palpable and painful, that, in place of giving life and treasure to attain it, I would make an equal sacrifice to escape it. Our fathers gave us a Union founded upon mutual consent, concession, and reciprocal attachment; we would entail upon our children a political connection based upon hatred, suspicion, and opposing prejudices. A nationality thus constituted would be a mockery of republicanism and its bane. It would be as the consummation of a marriage where antipathy usurped the place of love; a political prostitution; the joining of hands before an altar whose divinity could attest the heart's irrepressible loathing and disgust. Had I the faculty to crush with one blow the material power of the South, I would not strike. My pride as an American would revolt at the thought of dragging them, reluctant, helpless, and spirit-broken, into a fellowship that they abhor. Union restored by subjugation would be but the prelude of increasing altercation. It is not enough to affirm that I would not enforce the unnatural connection; sir, I would not consent to it. I would oppose it as a degradation to ourselves, an insult to our institutions, and a violation of our principles of self-government. I would oppose it as an impediment to our national progress; as a perpetuation of discord and contention between States, and as involving either its own future dissolution or the assumption by the general government of military and despotic functions fatal to republicanism. I confess, sir, that I apprehend no difficulties or misfortunes in the event of a separation,

at all commensurate with those that must inevitably prove the sequences of reunion by mere force of arms.

I can conceive two great republics, expanding to grandeur, moving side by side upon principles almost identical, extending the area of self-government, the one northward and westward, the other southward and westward, united for mutual defence, and protected by a wise and generous alliance from the jar of conflicting interests. I can conceive them gravitating towards each other, drawing nearer and nearer as asperities and unpleasant memories soften with the lapse of time, until, when the safe and natural limits of political affinity shall have been determined, the two mighty nations shall merge again into one, upon a foundation perfected by the experiences of the past. But I cannot conceive a happy, prosperous, and republican Union, cemented by blood, remoulded in repugnance and prolonged by the submission of the weak to the dictation of the strong.

A partnership in our Confederacy should be granted as a boon, and only to those that seek it; not enforced as an obligation upon those that ask it not. It should be held a privilege to be proud of, not an imposition to shrink from and protest against. Were I certain that, in a military sense, this war would prove successful, nevertheless I would oppose it; for with the destruction of the resisting power of the South, would vanish every hope of their existence as equal and contented members of one household. How much more firmly then shall I oppose it, when I feel that as a mere trial for supremacy in arms, it will result only in mutual exhaustion.

In my view, therefore, this war, nominally for the Union, has actually been waged against it. With that belief, rather than prolong it, I would concede a separation as the only means of an ultimate reunion upon such principles as a true republican should entertain. Animosities have been engendered, and conflicting principles have been developed by hostilities to an extent that renders reunion in the present state of feeling an event to shrink from as unnatural. Those conflicting principles may be reconciled when the smoke of battle shall have passed away, but surely not until then. When every conciliatory measure shall have been resorted to in vain; when negotiation shall

have been exhausted ; when the purpose of the Southern people to abstain from political companionship with us shall have been demonstrated as fixed and irrevocable, and not the passionate resolves of heated blood, then, as a necessity useless to struggle against, I shall not only counsel, I shall urge, a separation.

Sir, it is natural that, for every patriot, this word separation should be fraught with sorrow and foreboding. It is hard to realize the sundering of ties that we have been taught to believe sacred and eternal. He who beholds the shadow of death hovering above the scene of his domestic joys—the husband bending over the form of his dying wife, the father gazing at the ashen sign of dissolution that marbles the linements of his favorite child, in his agony rebels against providence. But when the spirit has flown, when what is earthly has been consigned to earth, and what is immortal has gone to its immortal home, the mourner bows before the will from which he knows that there is no appeal. Let us likewise bend before an inexorable truth.

I cannot measure the affection of my countrymen for the sublime inheritance bequeathed to us ; but I know that there dwells in my own breast a boundless love and a great pride for those principles which the builders of our nationality made the arch-pillars of their work. I yearn towards the Union with an intensity made only deeper by listening to the solemn tones of its passing bell. In my childhood I was taught to love my country ; and my manhood has made that sacred lesson a part of my religion, a part of myself, an essence and a necessity in all that is spiritual within me. It is not that wild enthusiasm, that superficial glow so readily fed by grandiloquence and bonfires upon Independence day ; but it is a steady and a reasonable love, matured by the conviction that beneficence, freedom, and prosperity are the attributes, and might be made the eternal accessories of our political institutions.

Here, sir, has been a magnificent temple—as perfect in all its parts as human ingenuity and labor could make it—admirably suited to be the home of a great and happy family ; impervious to the assaults of foreign enemies ; the refuge of the oppressed ; the pride of its inmates ;

the envy and wonder of the world. But upon what foundation was the structure built? Sir, upon the free will of the people. Not of one State, or of one section; but of all the States and of all the sections. While that free will existed, the temple was of a nature to withstand the ravages of time. That free will has ceased to exist, and the temple has crumbled into dust. It is no more. It is a glory of the past. What you now conceive to be the structure is but a memory so intense that it seems reality; but the substance is not there. Rebuild it if you can; but you must first secure the free will of the South, which your armies and navies cannot do.

Why, then, make loud protestations that the Union must and shall be preserved, when you lack the first requisite of preservation? It were folly, sir, to do so, if it were but the dream of an infatuated people; but when out of that dream comes the reality of bloodshed, ruin, and desolation; when to sustain the illusion the stimulants of war, in its most terrible form, must be applied, it is no longer folly, it is crime. It is an invitation to the Almighty to launch his curse upon a blood-enamored race.

If we will cease the mad attempt to enforce fraternity and to compel concord, perhaps the sundered links may be rejoined; but not one stroke will fall upon the anvil, until the echo of the last gun of the last battle shall have ceased to vibrate over the last battle plain. Self-exculpation and reproach alike must cease; for the country's salvation lies not in the justification of either section, but in the mutual remission of offences. They have both their faults, but bending before hard blows is not among them. Doubtless wrong and injustice have been done; but it is for calmer minds and less excited times to strike the balance, and mete out to either side the measure of its blame. It is not the original error that we have to do with now; it is the present, daily, continuous crime of multiplying human sacrifices to the spirit of our nationality, whose very essence is fraternal love. It is a spirit that was born of compromise and generous concession; and now, when gory hecatombs are heaped before its shrine, ours is the fault if it loathe the offering and desert our desecrated temples.

Sir, I appreciate the extent of this Government's military resources. I acknowledge its wonderful strength in ships, men, and munitions. Had we a foreign foe to grapple with, one-half the battles we have waged against the South would have decided the issue to our triumph. No earthly power could resist our magnificent machinery of war, directed in a cause that touched the people's heart. If the Confederate

armies, all massed together and fired with the lust of subjugation, should invade one Northern State, the thought of our violated firesides would arouse an energy that would scatter the invaders like leaves before the wind. But in this war we have no principle that comes home to the heart of the masses; we are fighting for subjugation; with a patriotic ulterior purpose, perhaps, but still for subjugation. If that is a principle, it is one that can never arouse the energies of the American people.

The foe has us at a disadvantage, sir. He believes that he is fighting for the sanctity of his home; for the freehold of his native soil; for social institutions that he was taught to justify; and for his conception of self government.

Sir, the American soldier, without sectional distinction, fights best in such a cause. No dream of laurel crowns can make the notes of war harmonious to his soul; no greed of conquest lures him to far-off battle plains. But where, within sight, the smoke curls from his cottage chimney; where the corn waves in the furrow where he planted it, and the pastures and pathways about him are his familiar haunts, he stands a warrior born. He counts not the number of his foes; he measures not their strength; he knows himself indomitable.

Therefore it is that the South has maintained itself, defiant, resolute, and hopeful, against the most formidable military operations known in the history of war. The question of superiority in skill or courage is not at issue. In these we stand upon equality, and man's power to resist is greater than his equal's power to compel. The only prospect of accommodation rests in a calm, dispassionate appeal to the judgment and better feelings of the contending parties.

With such convictions, and believing that every hour of hostilities tends to our further estrangement, I have never voted a dollar for the war. As a legislator, as a citizen, and as a man, I claim to be absolved from all participation in this murderous strife. With all my humble abilities I have endeavored to arrest it. I shall still endeavor, and if in vain, let my efforts attest, before God and man, that I am unstained with the blood of my countrymen.

If, by giving all latitude to argument, I could discover a possibility of effecting a friendly reconstruction by dint of terrible encounters between armed hosts, I might look on in silence and patiently await the end. But even in the event of the most complete and crushing victories, I see but the sullen, forced, and temporary submission of the vanquished to a rule that they abhor. Can this stabbing and shooting

and shivering with shells convince the wrong, or reconcile the angry, or inspire with confidence those that distrust, and with friendship those that hate us? Will time and habit make subjection acceptable to a proud and sensitive race? At this day Poland, struggling in her chains with hopeless desperation, is answering the question. When I look about me and see this spacious hall filled with enlightened gentlemen, clothed with great power and with great responsibilities, I am amazed that with all this concentration of intellect upon one subject, no means can be devised to accomplish a political end, without converting the country into shambles and its people into butchers.

How the problem may be resolved I know not; but I know that it is not in process of solution while armies are in the field. While the energies of men on either side are concentrated upon warlike measures, it is impossible for their minds to dwell with deliberation upon expedients for peace. It is no time to argue the terms of amicable adjustment with a duellist when his finger is on the trigger; he must first be invited to lower the instrument of death. The intellect of our statesmen is now preoccupied with war; their natures, mental and moral, are under the control of that feverish excitement created by the contemplation of the changing fortunes of a desperate and bloody struggle. Grant them an interval of repose, a respite from the absolute tyranny that war exerts over the feelings of mankind, and their thoughts will revert into a natural channel, and will seek to unravel these disordered political meshes with the patient labor of the brain. From us, as being materially the stronger party, the proposition for an armistice can come with a good grace. Let wise and just men from all the States assemble in convention; if then, sir, no honorable peace can be secured, my faith in human nature will have passed away.

Sir, before that solemn conclave would come as an advocate the ghost of the buried year, with all its mournful memories, with its hundreds of thousands of ghastly spectres, with its record of anguish, bereavement, and desolation; and its warning finger would point to a vision of the future, in semblance of itself, but more hideous a thousand fold. They would not dare to mock the warning. Passion and prejudice would shrink from the presence of that awful past. It would not be a gathering of excited partizans, but a council of grave men, assembled in the interests of humanity, in the same spirit of truth-searching as physicians deliberating to chase away a pestilence. Sir, such a convention would never adjourn to renew the signal of civil strife. They might fail to fulfil to the utmost the hopes of their con-

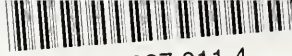
stituents; they might concede too much on one side or the other; but never, from their calm judgment-seats, would they launch again the thunderbolts of war upon our already bleeding and exhausted country.

Sir, you may have observed that I have spoken without regard to the views of other men, or the doctrines of political organizations. If I stand alone, my isolation conjures up no phantoms of doubt or fear. While my country groans beneath the stroke of her own dagger, I forswear all allegiance to party. Whatever proposition, in my mind, shall enhance the prospect of a peace, shall have my vote. Peace is the goal of my political course, the haven of my hopes. I care not by whose chart I steer, or whose hand shall guide the helm, so that the compass shall point thitherward. Whosoever shall raise its standard shall find me ready to serve beneath its folds. Whosoever shall blazon the olive branch for his device, shall have me his adherent. In whatever shape the demon of destruction shall appear, I will oppose him. In whatever garb the spirit of Peace shall clothe her radiant form, I will embrace her. Conciliation, compromise, or separation, each shall be acceptable to me, if as its consequence, we shall be spared the scourge of war. Let the most zealous emancipationist suggest a cessation of hostilities, and I am with him. Let the staunchest member of the opposition uphold the war, and I am against him. I have no sympathies with those who denounce the Administration, and yet call for vigorous hostilities. In my view the abolitionist is a more honest politician and a more conscientious citizen. He is a fanatic—not a mere time server; wrong, but consistent in his wrong; the worshipper of a false god, but earnest in his adoration. Would that all who denounce him were as sincere and as bold in the expression of their opinion. I have striven to avoid invective, but I cannot repress my scorn for that American citizen who, at such a time as this, fashions his words according to the exigencies of a party, or in the mould of popular opinion. They plead that the people are not prepared for the naked truth. Sir, in this crisis, Truth may destroy the utterer, but it may save his country.

Let the friends of peace proclaim themselves as such. Let them not fear to be premature. This day is not one day too soon for their lips to assert what their hearts know to be true. If the people are not prepared, let us commence the task of preparation. It is a task already half accomplished, for indeed the masses, with their unerring instincts, have already fathomed the depths of this great sea of troubles. They would welcome reunion for its own sake and for the memories of old; or, if inevitable, they would accept separation, with a sigh of regret,

and then push on alone in the broad path of progress; for their self-reliant, Anglo-Saxon natures would spurn the timid doctrine that the sturdy North, their North, built by their energies, and with millions of acres yet unreclaimed from the wilderness, for expansion, is dependent upon the South for prosperity and grandeur.

Sir, for my country's sake I have performed a task that only the most solemn sense of duty could have induced me to assume. I have given you my thoughts as plainly as my gift of language would permit. For good or for evil, to my shame or to my future honor, let my words go upon record, to abide the test of time. No generous man will accuse me of aiming at popularity, for all must acknowledge that I have not modelled my opinions upon the public sentiment; and even those who think with me will doubtless withhold the present expression of their approbation. Paltering and equivocation have not been numbered in the list of accusations which my enemies have made against me. My motives have been and will be impugned, and probably, for a time, I must submit to be the object of denunciation; but the rushing stream of events will soon efface the brand, and I can wait. I only ask my countrymen to adjudge me, not hastily or in anger, but after fair consideration. Neither the ties of relationship or pecuniary interest bind me to the South; all that I possess, and all that I hold personally dear are of the North. My course has been prompted by an intense conviction that the war policy is ruinously wrong. Reason, instinct, moral nature, and every faculty of man that creates within his brain a conception of the truth, inspire me with that conviction, with a rigid, fixed, and unfaltering faith, that knows no doubt and fears no refutation. And as the days rush on through blood and carnage, they leave in their desolate path the confirmation of my creed. Already the time seems generating when patriotism will no longer be invoked as an incentive to destruction; when, over the graves of heroes, the ruins of homesteads, and the dreary wastes of devastated fields, the North and the South shall clasp their hands, cleansed from the stain of blood, saying each to the other: "All is forgiven; let what is terrible of the past be sepulchred with the ashes of the fallen."



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